

# EDITORIALS & COMMENT

## Ridge doesn't want to testify because his administration has no plan

By John B. Larson

To listen to the pundits, the struggle to compel Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge to testify before Congress is merely another chapter in the age-old battle between executive prerogative and legislative oversight. I believe there is more to this dispute than a clash between the executive and legislative branches of the government.



RIDGE  
turf wars.

It is obvious that the nation has never been more united and patriotic than in our response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11.

Clearly, we are a nation that is more alert and more aware of conflicts throughout the globe and their ramifications, but it is also clear that we are no better prepared to deal with another terrorist attack than we were on Sept. 10, 2001.

If money were the only answer, then the \$38 billion that was appropriated for homeland security would easily solve our problems. But in fact it is money that is the heart of the problem and central to the policies of homeland defense.

What this means is that the \$38 billion that Congress has appropriated is being fought over by various agencies within the federal bureaucracy, which seem more concerned

with protecting their own turf than with the defense of the nation.

That is why Tom Ridge can't testify; because there is no unified plan, or more appropriately, no plan that the overlapping agencies that have been tasked with homeland security can agree on. So the tradition of stove piping with all its bureaucratic inefficiency goes on at the expense of the nation's security.

Yet Americans understand that it wasn't the FBI, the CIA, the INS, or the military that immediately responded to the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11. Rather, it was the local police, firefighters, medical professionals, emergency medical teams, and hospitals that responded in such a magnificent and heroic manner that day.

Homeland defense begins at the municipal level, and our local communities are our first responders to acts of terrorism and other disasters.

The various federal agencies apparently see a nation ready to ante up to meet the challenge of homeland defense and are now

maneuvering to redirect the necessary funding from local municipalities and states back to the bureaucracy inside the Beltway.

This is where Tom Ridge — a former governor well-versed in the struggle between state and federal government — needs to stand up. There is great support in Congress to give him both the authority and the bud-

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get to mount an effective response to this grab for dollars, and make sure the money gets to where it is needed — on the local level. Front-line responders understand the need for communication and operability between agencies and the need for the training and equipment to respond to any terrorist threat.

While there is logic to a centralized response, it must be organized from the bottom up and not the top down. Ridge needs to head off the grab for the dollars reaching local responders.

The columnist Thomas Friedman has said that the failure of the nation on Sept. 11 was a failure of imagination, our inability to

think outside the box.

The rigidity of our government agencies and their lack of flexibility and coordination in their responses worked against us. Future hearings will bear out the lack of inter-agency communication and coordination and the glaring need for the bottom-up, front-line response. This front-line response unit cannot be coordinated from the top down in a bunker in Colorado, as suggested most recently by the call for \$300 million to start up the Northern Command. It needs local input, local coordination, and federal dollars.

The nation is united behind the president and the effort to root out terrorism around the globe while protecting the home front. There exists the will to do this in Congress, but this effort cannot be crippled by a bureaucracy that simply cannot respond.

It is apparent why Ridge may not want to testify before a committee. But he has an obligation to be forthright with the American people.

This is a persistent and thorny problem that needs to be tackled. It's hard to look in the mirror and see that our own agencies are a part of the problem of homeland security that begs for leadership.

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